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Self-constitution of Society and the Politics of Identity – Controversies about Caste – Introduction

Martin Fuchs

»Caste« as object of social and scholarly discourse has had a varied career. Today still caste has a strong hold over discourses in and on India. In the eyes of many outside observers caste embodies India's otherness. Caste is being regularly referred to when India's alleged backwardness is to be explained. Often understood as »system« or tightly knit order, caste even more than religiosity represents what makes India specific, marks it as static and traditional and forces the individual into a rigid normative frame, aside from enshrining hierarchy and inequality. Caste, it is being said, leaves no room for subjectivity and individual agency. Included is the assumption that social critique is being short-circuited in the dominion of caste and that members of lower castes fatalistically accept their fate. Any idea of egalitarianism seems obstructed from the outset. Consequentially caste also has to bear the brunt of blame for India's alleged failure to modernize.

Around the middle of the 19th century caste came to be established in western-colonial discourse as the defining structural feature of Indian society. The history of intensive western cognitive as well as political engagements in matters of caste had started in the early 19th century, with earlier antecedents. The concept of caste as it found entrance into the social sciences is the result of a process of discursive interactions that involved Orientalist scholars, Christian missionaries, colonial administrators and colonial ethnographers as well as Indian social reformers and social movements. We have to constantly recall that »caste« originally was not an Indian term (its origin is Portuguese), that the term refers to at least two very distinct notions in Indian social discourse, *varna* and *jati* (and actually others too), themselves diversely applied and of varying precision, and that the term as it crystallized during that interactive process primarily represents an effort of capturing a fluid, multifaceted and evolving social reality with one category. It was the colonial British administration, above all the census of 1901, which objectified and rigidified caste, only to having to discover afterwards that the attempt to pin caste(s) down instigated unforeseen disputes over the rank of individual groups from among those being framed this way.

Deconstructing and reconstructing the history of caste discourse became one of the concerns of postcolonial debates. Authors criticized the colonial construction, if

not colonial »invention« of caste.¹ Parallel to the unfolding of this line of discursive critique, however, a different movement evolved: the rediscovery as well as resurgence of forms of social criticism of the discriminatory and oppressive character of the caste »system«. The voices of lower status groups or castes, previously often passed over, became audible on wider scale, both in the political and the academic spheres; the long history of anti-hierarchical social movements, of which also little recognition had been taken earlier in the academic as well as the wider public, was newly discovered (see: e.g. Aloysius 1998). Free articulation of the voices of social critique has been bolstered by the democratic system and the policy of »positive discrimination«, or reservation, laid down in the Indian constitution of 1950, which provides for some possibilities of institutionalizing a stronger presence of lower castes on various levels of state and society.

Looking at today's situation caste is being articulated in what seem discrepant ways. There are those, most of them urban intellectuals, who claim that caste is losing its sway over social actors, becoming less significant at least among the urban middle class. Lower caste scholars and activists on the contrary insist on the continuous relevance of caste, which shows in crass power politics, in form of recurring atrocities against members of lower castes, or is experienced hidden in seemingly liberal attitudes and practices. The struggle against caste discrimination itself, however, regularly and, as it seems, unavoidably falls back upon strategies of mobilizing the oppressed castes separately, using caste to fight against caste, and thus in a somewhat tragic way confirms what it attempts to overcome.² In the public sphere, in civil society and especially in the realm of party politics, the caste factor is meanwhile openly and viciously played with, evolving into a form of ethnic politics. In this struggle over public resources, to which every group in principle now has equal access, it is no longer hierarchy but more and more a notion of »communitarian egalitarianism« that informs action (see: Bhargava 2000). Finally, some scholars today try to conceive caste as part of an Indian modality of modernity that other than the prototypical west retains a communal dimension side by side with individualisation. In particular they point out continuing and newly adapted forms of communal and local self-governance using caste structures. This then allows and actually compels us to imagine specific Indian forms of civil society. The notion of stepwise development along a preconceived line is being replaced by a notion of variations of the modern universal. Against the background of centralizing and unifying tendencies of modernity, the internal (part-)autonomy of »castes«, which

1 Nicholas Dirks (2001) in particular popularized the idea that caste is an invention. He, however, retracted from the implications of this phrase and even tried to bridge the gap between postcolonial critique of caste and social critique of discrimination through caste.

2 The dilemma lies of course in the double character of caste: representing networks of solidarity as well as mechanisms of separation, hierarchization and stigmatization.

run several civic and public functions themselves, is being discussed anew, as are the possibilities of individuals to deal with and negotiate group structures.

Caste thus means (and always meant) different things to different people in different contexts. Caste is not only something that defines people, something in which people are enshrined, but also something people fight over, something people address and take on. Caste can only be understood when seen contextually refracted by respective social, political, economic as well as cultural issues – issues concerning livelihood questions and the social support system, control over resources, class differentiation, as well as outright discrimination and marginalization (stigmatization, exclusion); issues concerning the balance between the rights and powers of the individual and the collective (community) respectively, the relationship between religion and society, or the form of civil society and political society, i.e. of modes of social mobilization vis-à-vis the state and the modes of local and communal self-governance mentioned. And one could continue this list. As social analysts we have not only to engage with this polysemy and the tensions between the different contextual meanings of caste and find our way through them. What is more, we also have to think of ways of *theoretically* conceptualizing the very fact of *simultaneity* and *overlap* of different *frames of reference* within one and the same social context or field!

Other than what certain social scientists and colonial as well as post-colonial administrators would have thought, we are back to a situation (which actually we may have never left) in which caste cannot be neatly separated from the rest of social relationships. We do not have the *one* phenomenon of caste over which we can have a general, integrated, conclusive argument. Nor does caste signify one singular clear-cut form of social institution (*Vergesellschaftung*). Moreover, and this is important, caste has become reflexive, starting on large scale with the reactions to the colonial classifications (as after the 1901 census). Social actors do not only act from within caste but *with respect to* caste or to different dimensions of caste discourse and decide when and in which context to instantiate the term or certain of its meanings or to invent meanings, i.e. new customs and caste histories.

Just as introductory analytical clarification – which is only one step to solve the complexities on the level of social life – I want to distinguish summarily four discursive-cum-practical modalities of existence or *modes of being* of caste coexisting in contemporary discourse as well as practice.

In the first mode caste is taken as a social fact *sui generis*. This is the idea that society is organized into numerous pigeon-holes, arranged in *hierarchical* order. The idea appears in two variants: The empiricist variant foregrounds the individual social entity called caste, and its specific customs and characteristics; the structuralist or ideational variant, regularly making use of the Brahmanical *varna* scheme, foregrounds the overall structure or system and its mode of operation. While this first

mode of being of caste, in both its variants, sees social actors enshrined in the social institution or social structure respectively, the second mode takes social institution as something its members deal with or act upon. This is the idea of caste as a *corporate* body and collective political actor, as collective identity and pressure-group, engaged with other groups of the same kind in a struggle over economic and public resources. While these two modes are linked, the second following the first, logically and historically, they also stand in opposition to each other. This had been voiced most clearly by Louis Dumont (1980) who saw the second mode as a kind of substantialization of an originally relational mode.

The first two modes take caste as differentiated and separate, as a reality of its own, following its own logic. The next two modes take the contrary view and see caste in context, see caste as entangled with other aspects and modalities of social life. Both modes have been formulated in response to the first two, often in form of critique, but they also refer to, or claim to refer to a pre-colonial condition of life. Thus the third mode emphasizes the *fluidity* and flexibility of Indian social life, including forms of collectivity. Several historical studies have shown how obviously well-engrained castes have only relatively recently being formed or taken on new shape, as they also point out the wide range of collective forms of organization and action – lineages and tribal segments, occupational associations, guilds, *sampradayas*, royal retinues, etc. – amongst which it is difficult to pin-point the endogamous entities we like to call caste. While this seems a historical argument we have to remember that remnants of this mode (and the accompanying attitude) have survived codification by the »ethnographic state« (as Dirks (2001) calls the colonial state of the second half of the 19th century): We still find examples of fluidity in contemporary Indian collective life. Castes reassemble and split and sometimes even attain a significantly improved status position. Here would also be the place to make allowance for the centralist model of caste society, following which caste relations and interactions are centred on local or regional power-holders or power-holding-groups (landlords, rulers). The centralist model has been introduced into anthropological and historical literature as an anti-dote to the all-pervasive model of hierarchy focussing on the Brahmin priest (see in particular: Dirks 1987; Raheja 1988; Quigley 1993).

The *fourth mode* I suggest to term the reflexive-counterfactual: in this mode caste is seen as not really real, but as invented by deceit and force. Stories are galore of how individual castes were induced or pressed into their positions. More important, however, are the beliefs of the caste *system* being an invention. Low castes blame the Brahmins or »Brahmanism« for this, while scholars blame colonial thinking and praxis for reifying and rigidifying caste structures. The fourth form is again linked to the third and seems partly derived from it. I avoid using the term »ideology« in this context. My concern here is not with modes of thought that are deemed to lessen

the burden of finding oneself at the bottom of society by putting the blame on some scapegoat. What I find significant and want to point out at this moment is the insight or *feeling* of caste being not the final truth, of caste being artificial, being made up.

The four modes of being of caste, which I just tried to distinguish, have been arranged in two pairs, revolving around two axes: While the first two modes take caste as something objective, even naturalized, the last two take caste as contingent practices. Each mode also has a special link to one particular type of social theory, or theorizing of society: The first represents an objectivist, even deterministic mode which tends to treat social actors as cardboard figures; the second focuses on instrumental and strategic action; the third has links to notions of life-world or notions of praxis; while the fourth borders on social critique and critique of representation.

I mention this to show how much our understanding of caste depends on our theoretical position. But this is not my only concern here. For my purpose here I rather want to point to the fact of *coexistence*, of *simultaneity* of the different modes of being of caste in scholarly *as well as* political discourse *as also* in the everyday practices of social actors, and want to point to the general implications of this for our concept of social reality, if we actually want to include all facets of something like caste and caste discourse. The four modes distinguished do not refer just to positions in the intellectual field, competing with or fighting each other. Instead, each of them has some grounding in social life. That is, social practices and social actors' discourses are themselves marked by or torn between different discursive positions, not always neatly supplementing each other. We have to see both the discursive heterogeneity of society, on all levels, and the diversity of social contextualisations of caste.

I want to end these introductory remarks with an epistemological note: Caste, and perhaps other cases of ethnographic and social representation as well, force us to rethink our concept of social reality and to finally give up all objectivist and positivist notions of social reality. Representations of a social phenomenon like caste are not just ways to think and talk about reality, but in specific ways are parts of the very reality which they articulate and on which they act. While Foucault introduced us to discursive practices, epistemes and the significance of knowledge-power-regimes, I would strongly suggest that we should not think in terms of sweeping, encompassing (comprehensive) discourses, or closed frames of thought. I rather see the field of caste discourse as an example of co-presence of different frames – not all of them of course being equal. New frames or discursive formations, at least in the context discussed here, do not extinguish earlier ones while they may fuse with each other, interpenetrate each other, or keep their relationship in suspense. Discourses or discursive practices do not exist singly. While we cannot separate be-

tween social reality and its conceptualization, we can observe distinctive positions and discursive as well as practical switches between different perspectives or modes of being. And we observe the possibility of reflection and reflexive distance, not just by the outside observer but also from the side of social actors. The relationship between thought and social action is not fixed.

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